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A Look at Investigative Journalism

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"BUYING THE BOMB" means to show us investigative journalism as it's happening: Watch a reporter while he asks tough questions. In fact, the "Frontline" production is more like an entertainment: Watch the participants while they put together a television program. "Frontline" has a good story to tell, but it surrenders to histrionics while it tells it. The program will be seen on Channel 13 at 9 tonight.

The story is this: Last June, Federal agents in Houston arrested Nazir Ahmed Vaid, a Pakistani, when he tried to smuggle out of the country 50 timing devices that could have been used to trigger nuclear bombs. Mr. Vaid, who had been under surveillance for months, had ordered the devices — called krytrons — from an electrical supply store.

The agents who arrested Mr. Vaid and the Federal attorneys who prosecuted him were convinced he was operating on behalf of a foreign government. However, they were unable to prove it. In Federal Court, Mr. Vaid was allowed to plea-bargain to a reduced charge. He was found guilty of violating export law, given a comparatively mild sentence, and then deported.

At the sentencing, the judge said that Mr. Vaid "apparently had no malicious intent beyond trying to expedite what he thought was a business deal," and that he did not seem to be an "enemy agent."

Nonetheless, it does seem clear that Mr. Vaid was a Pakistani agent. When he was arrested, customs officials seized a series of letters linking him to S. A. Butt, a director of procurement for the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. The letters did not deal with the 50 timing devices,

however, and neither the customs agents nor the Federal prosecutors seemed to be aware of Mr. Butt's position.

Indeed, when customs agents routinely processed Mr. Butt's name through a Treasury Department computer, they found nothing to arouse suspicion.

Nonetheless, the Vaid case, which was also the subject of an article in The New York Times on Feb. 25, seems to contradict Pakistan's assertions that it is not developing a nuclear bomb. It also seems to indicate that the United States, through laxity or ineptitude, does not enforce the Atomic Energy Act. The act, aimed, among other things, at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, calls for a prison term of up to 20 years for anyone trying to illegally export nuclear components.

Clearly, these are solemn issues. On "Frontline," however, the story is not so much about the issues as it is about Seymour M. Hersh, the "Frontline" reporter. That's made apparent when he first appears on camera.

"My name is Seymour Hersh," he says. "This is a film about my investigation into the true identity of Nazir Ahmed Vaid."

And that's what we see — the investigation, along with a good deal of moral indignation by Mr. Hersh. Indeed, it's his indignation, not the news story, that moves the production along. Meanwhile, we seem to be watching not a documentary, but a slippery docudrama. Are things really happening the way we see them?

Thus Mr. Hersh sometimes pleads bafflement. "It could be we're all wet on this," he says. A moment later, he asks, "Is it possible we're all wrong?"

And is it possible that Mr. Hersh is acting? It's hard to believe that he and "Frontline" are going to all this trouble without knowing how things

are going to turn out. When Mr. Hersh does find compromising telexes with Mr. Butt's name on them (this part is a little confusing; how does Mr. Hersh know that Mr. Butt works for the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission when the customs agents didn't?) he is triumphant.

"This is it," he says excitedly. "This puts the lie to Vaid."

This also strains credibility. Mr. Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize winner and former New York Times reporter, is a superior investigative journalist, but it's the drama that's important here, not what he's finding out. At the same time, the drama is used to embroider the facts. After he finds the telexes, Mr. Hersh — talking directly into the camera — says the customs agents "knew" that Mr. Vaid was operating at the behest of Pakistan: "They knew it from day one."

This suggests a high-level Government cover-up, presumably so Pakistan won't be embarrassed. Maybe there was a cover-up. On the other hand, all that "Frontline" has proven is that the Federal agents did not associate Mr. Butt with the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. A cover-up? Perhaps. But ineptitude is just as likely.

Nevertheless, applaud Mr. Hersh for taking on the story. It is healthy when Federal officials who are supposed to enforce the Atomic Energy Act know they are being watched.

Meanwhile, Judy Woodruff, the "Frontline" anchor, concludes the program by declaring that the White House is lobbying against legislation to force Pakistan to "warrant" that it does not have a nuclear bomb. One wishes that Miss Woodruff had noted that the problem is bigger than that. Pakistan has said it will not sign a treaty to curb the spread of nuclear weapons until India does.

"Buying the Bomb" was produced and directed by Mark Obenhaus.